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OF THE
DISCOVERY OF ANÆSTHESIA.

A REPLY TO
MRS. ELIZABETH WHITMAN MORTON.

BY G. Q. COLTON



NEW YORK:
A. G. SHERWOOD & Co., PRINTERS,
47 LAFAYETTE PLACE.

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In the September number of *McClure's Magazine*, appears a somewhat lengthy article from Mrs. Morton, in which she endeavors to prove that her late husband, Dr. W. T. G. Morton, was the discoverer of anæsthesia. Her story is interesting, but many of her statements must have been drawn from her imagination.

At the present day, every medical, surgical and dental journal throughout the country, with a single exception, award this honor to the late Dr. Horace Wells. Let us consider the facts:

On the 10th of December, 1844, I gave an exhibition of laughing gas in the city of Hartford, Conn. After a brief lecture on the properties and effects of the gas, I invited a dozen or fifteen gentlemen to come upon the stage, who would like to inhale it. Among those who came forward was Dr. Horace Wells, a dentist of Hartford, and a young man by the name of Cooley

Cooley inhaled the gas, and while under its influence ran against some wooden settees on the stage, and bruised his legs badly. On taking his seat next to Dr. Wells, the latter said to him, "You must have hurt yourself." "No." Then he began to feel some pain, and was astonished to find his legs bloody; he said he felt no pain till the effects of the gas had passed off.

At the close of the exhibition Dr. Wells came to me, and said, "Why cannot a man have a tooth extracted under the gas, and not feel it?" I replied that I did not know. Dr. Wells then said he believed it could be done, and would try it on himself, if I would bring a bag of gas to his office. The next day—11th of December, 1844—I went to his office with a bag of gas. Dr. Wells called in a neighboring dentist, Dr. Riggs, to draw his tooth.

I gave the gas to Wells, giving somewhat more than the night before, and Dr. Riggs extracted the tooth. Dr. Wells, on recovering, exclaimed, "*It is the greatest discovery ever made; I didn't feel it so much as the prick of a pin!*" That was the first tooth ever drawn without pain; a fact which no one, even Dr. Morton, ever disputed. At the request of Dr. Wells, I instructed him how to make the gas, and then went off on my exhibition business. Wells got up the appa-

ratus and commenced to make and use the gas. After thoroughly testing its anæsthetic power, he went to Boston to make his discovery known to the world. He called on a number of dentists and told what he had done and could do ; among them was Dr. Morton, his former pupil and partner. Dr. Morton, as well as all the others, laughed at his pretended discovery, and would not even try it. At last he went to Cambridge College, and the elder Dr. Warren, at the close of his lecture on surgery, said to the class, "There is a gentleman here who pretends he has got something which will destroy pain in a surgical operation. He wants to address you. If any of you would like to remain and hear him, you can do so." (One of the class told me this.) Quite a number did remain. After a short lecture, Dr. Wells gave the gas to a boy for the extraction of a tooth. He took the bag away a little too soon, and the boy screamed out, though he said he did not know when the tooth was drawn. But the students hissed and pronounced the thing a humbug. Dr. Wells, discouraged, then returned to Hartford and resumed his practice, using the gas as an anæsthetic. He used the gas all of 1845. Bishop Brownell and his two daughters, with some forty of the most respectable citizens of Hartford, afterwards, gave their depositions that during that

year, 1845, Dr. Wells extracted teeth for them without pain, using the gas as an anæsthetic.

At the end of 1845 Wells went to Europe on account of failing health. He presented his claim to the Academy of Sciences in Paris, and was given the honor of an "M.D."

Now, mark! In the month of September, 1846, and while Wells was in Europe, Dr. Morton went to Dr. Jackson, a chemist of Boston, to learn how to make the nitrous oxide gas, as he wished to test the truth of Wells' pretended discovery. Dr. Jackson said to him, "Why, that gas exhilarates, makes people laugh, dance, etc. Sulphuric ether will do the same, as that will exhilarate. Try ether if you wish to try anything." Dr. Morton asked what stuff ether was. Dr. Jackson answered—"It is a liquid; you can buy it at any drug store." Upon this hint, Morton gets some ether and tries it on a boy by the name of Eben Frost. This took place on the 30th of September, 1846, and was the first experiment by Morton with ether. (Dr. Wells, before he went to Europe, at the suggestion of Dr. Marcy, gave ether to a gentleman for the removal of a wen from the scalp. So that in the use of ether, Wells antedated Morton by two years.)

Dr. Morton reported the success of his operation on the boy to Dr. Jackson; and then they in-

stituted a series of experiments, proving that ether would destroy pain. They then applied jointly for a patent. "We claim" so and so. The issue of the patent was delayed, and Jackson, being a man of science, and thinking (probably) that the thing might turn out a humbug, and not wishing his name associated with Morton, assigned his interest in the patent to Morton, taking an agreement, however, that Morton should pay him ten per cent. of all he made out of it. The patent was issued to Morton. When, afterwards, Jackson finds that same man's name will go down to posterity as a great discoverer, he claimed the honor of the discovery, as he suggested ether to Morton. An angry discussion followed between them on the subject.

On the return of Wells to the United States, in the latter part of 1847, he was astonished to find that Morton had obtained a patent, and claimed the honor of the discovery of anæsthesia! A very exciting discussion followed between them on the subject. This discussion so worked on the sensitive nature of Wells, that he became deranged and committed suicide. He died on the 24th of January, 1848.

It will be remembered that before Wells went to Europe, he had successfully used the gas as an anæsthetic for one year, 1845. No one had tried

it, save Wells alone. After the death of Wells, Morton set up the claim, that nitrous oxide *was not an anæsthetic*, and that insensibility could not be produced by it, and therefore he, Morton, was the discoverer of anæsthesia. This was an admission, that if the gas *was* an anæsthetic, Wells was the discoverer.

No one took up the matter in defence of Dr. Wells, and the claim of Morton, that the gas was *not* an anæsthetic was generally allowed. Thus the gas lay dead and forgotten as an anæsthetic for seventeen years, from the time Wells went to Europe till I revived its use in 1863, and proved that it was the *best* and *safest* anæsthetic known for short operations. This took place at New Haven, Conn., in June, 1863.

Here was a period of seventeen years, during which time all the honors and decorations given to Morton, were made under *the mistaken idea* that nitrous oxide was *not* an anæsthetic, as claimed by Morton.

After I had proved that the gas *was* an anæsthetic, Morton was compelled to change his ground. He could no longer say that nitrous oxide was not an anæsthetic, and that, therefore, *he* was the discoverer of anæsthesia. So he took the ground that Wells *abandoned his discovery!* He abandoned it only while he was traveling on

the continent of Europe, where he could not speak the language.

After I had demonstrated that the gas was an anæsthetic, the medical journals throughout the country took up the subject and investigated it to the bottom. They came to the conclusion that to Dr. Wells alone, belonged the honor of the discovery of anæsthesia. Only one journal, and a small coterie of individuals in Boston, claim the honor for Dr. Morton.

The State of Connecticut and the City of Hartford, appropriated \$5,000 for the erection of a bronze monument and statue to the memory of Dr. Wells as the discoverer of anæsthesia. The monument was erected and now stands in Bushnell Park, with the name of Wells and the date of his discovery on it.

During the seventeen years, when the public were under the false impression that nitrous oxide was not an anæsthetic, a wealthy gentleman of Boston left \$10,000 in his will, to commemorate the name of the man who discovered the anæsthetic powers of ether. No name was mentioned in the will. The monument was erected, and stands in the public garden in Boston, *but no name appears on it!* At the unveiling of the monument, Dr. Shurtleff, the mayor, in his speech, did not even mention the name of Morton, or of

any one else. Perhaps there were too many of the wealthy friends of Dr. Jackson present!

Some time during these seventeen years—I cannot give the date—Dr. Jackson went over to Paris and urged his claim before the Academy of Sciences. He was recognized, by that famous institution and stands now recorded as the discoverer of anæsthesia!

When Dr. Morton brought out his anæsthetic, he called it “Lethean” in order to deceive the public, so he could sell “rights.” Mrs. Morton states that her husband did not enforce his patent. I find in the catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon-General’s office the following: “Morton (William T. G.) Circular. Morton’s Lethean,” cautioning those who attempt to infringe upon his legal rights.

Dr. Colburn told me that he bought the right for the use of Lethean for the city of Newark, N. J.

During these “seventeen years” Dr. Morton got a bill reported in the United States Senate, giving him \$100,000 for his discovery. It was defeated by thirteen majority.

Dr. Morton started out with a package of letters, and travelled through the country, soliciting contributions from physicians and dentists. On going West, a medical journal in that region gave

him a scathing reception, and did not hesitate to state that he was trying to "steal" the honor of the discovery of anæsthesia from Dr. Wells.

Some years ago I wrote a little pamphlet, embodying these facts, and sent copies to all the professors in our medical college of physicians and surgeons. They promptly endorsed the truth of my statements. The distinguished Dr. Sayre, to whom Mrs. Morton alludes, wrote me that if my pamphlet had been published years before, it would have saved a great deal of angry discussion.

On the 11th of December, 1894, the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of anæsthesia by Dr. Wells, the United States Dental Association gave a grand celebration of the event in Philadelphia. There were two thousand people present, including members of congress, college professors, physicians, etc. One of the ablest papers read on that occasion, was by a gentleman from Boston.

FOUR QUESTIONS.

1st: Did not Dr. Wells discover the anæsthetic effects of nitrous oxide gas on the 10th of December, 1844?

2nd: Did not Dr. Wells apply his discovery in the extraction of teeth during the year 1845?

3rd: Did not Dr. Morton apply ether, for the first time, on the 30th of September, 1846?

4th: Did not Dr. Morton get his first knowledge of anæsthesia from Dr. Wells and Dr. Jackson?

The reason for the revival of this old worn-out controversy just at this time, is to excite sympathy for Morton and *get his name put on that monument at Boston*. Boston will not engrave a lie on that monument.

Dr. Morton deserves great credit for pushing the use of ether into general use, but he was not the discoverer of anæsthesia.

Since the above was written I have chanced to obtain a copy of *The Chicago Medical Examiner* of December, 1865, from which I quote the following:

“ It was present with him before he had made his first successful demonstration, and prompted him to the dishonorable attempt to conceal the nature of his agent under the name of ‘ Letheon.’ It was this that sent him in hot haste, not only to Washington for a *patent* covering all of this country, but across the ocean for one in England also. When he soon found that neither false names nor patents would enable him to control the coveted pecuniary profits, the same controlling idea constrained him to further abandon his legitimate business and squander whatever fortune was at his command in feeing eminent lawyers, and carrying out, through a protracted period, all the corrupting acts of a *lobbying* career, during the sessions of Congress, for the purpose of inducing the national legislature to endorse his pretensions, by an appropriation of a few hundred thousand

dollars. All of which resulted in total failure, as was fitting and proper that it should.

“ If any of our readers think our remarks severe or captious, let them read the following preamble and resolutions, adopted almost unanimously, in a full meeting of the American Medical Association, held in the City of New York, in June, 1864:—

“ ‘ *Whereas*, In the appropriation bill now pending in Congress, is a clause donating to Dr. W. T. G. Morton, of Boston, the sum of \$200,000, as a recognition of his services in introducing sulphuric ether as an anæsthetic agent: and,

“ ‘ *Whereas*, The said Dr. Morton, by suits brought against charitable medical institutions, for infringements of an alleged patent covering all anæsthetic agents, not claiming sulphuric ether only, but the state of anæsthesia, however produced, as his invention, *has, by this act, put himself beyond the pale of an honorable profession* and of true laborers in the cause of science and humanity; therefore,

“ ‘ *Resolved*, That the American Medical Association enter their protest *against any* appropriation to Dr. Morton, on the ground of his unworthy conduct, also because of his unwarrantable assumption of a patentable right in anæsthesia.

“ ‘ *Resolved*, That a copy of these resolutions be forwarded to the Chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means.’ (See *Transactions*, Vol. xv., p. 53.)

“ Also the following, which was adopted unanimously, by the American Dental Association, during its annual session, in Niagara, in July, 1864:—

“ ‘ *Resolved*, By the American Dental Association, that to Horace Wells, of Hartford, Conn., now deceased,

belongs the credit and honor of the introduction of anæsthetics in the United States of America; and we firmly protest against the injustice done to the truth and memory of Horace Wells in the effort made during a series of years, and especially at the last session of Congress, to award the credit to other person or persons.'

"Now, when DR. MORTON will come before the profession and the world with a candid, truthful history of anæsthesia, giving to Dr. WELLS, Dr. JACKSON, and all others their just and proper credit, and claim for himself only just what he is fairly entitled to, namely, the credit of having, by the suggestion of Dr. JACKSON, substituted ether for the nitrous oxide gas used by Dr. WELLS, and, at the same time, confess that all the business, money, and health he has heretofore sacrificed has been in unsuccessful efforts, of a quackish and unprofessional character, to secure in some way the pecuniary profits of anæsthesia to himself, we will make a donation to the 'Morton Testimonial,' and invite all our friends to do the same. Until then, however, we must beg to be excused."

Mrs. Morton, in her magazine article, says: "Dr. Morton patented his application of sulphuric ether; but he never enforced the patent, for his humanity was too great to keep back from suffering millions so precious an agency of relief."

Mrs. Morton must have forgotten!

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